

The Six Sense Bases — Saḷāyatana Vibhaṅga Sutta (MN 137)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 21:59

Good evening, everybody. I hope you've had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, though I hope it has been happy.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed noble and fully self-awakened one.

So we've trudged our way through the taints, the disgusting ooziings, and then we looked at society, and each of us came to conclusion whether we're heading towards doom or whether we're at the great turning point. So I thought we'd move on to the psychology of the Buddha around dependent origination.

Remember, after he was fully liberated on that night, he then spent seven days according to the tradition—he spent seven days in bliss, really just enjoying the ecstasy of being liberated from all suffering. Those of you who know Ajahn Mahā Boowa, very famous monk in Thailand who declared himself to be fully liberated—you can see him on YouTube talking about that moment. And he begins to cry, just the joy of that liberation. Of course, everybody then said, how could it be an *arahant* if he's crying? And he gave a rather strong riposte to that.

So after that blissful seven days, he then spent the first part of the night, I think it was a night, going through what became known as dependent origination. In other words, the whole process whereby we create suffering for ourselves. And then on the second quarter or whatever, he went the other way, understanding how we can bring it to an end. And then finally, he made sure he got it right by going both ways up and down.

And remember that the Buddha's technique is always to deconstruct everything. But having deconstructed our experience, then he shows how it comes together, how it actually works to give us the impression of an entity, of a one being, of a me, of a self, of a soul, call it what you wish. Just like a good mechanic can pull a car apart and then an engine apart and then put it together again.

Actually, when I was thinking about this, it reminded me of an occasion in my childhood. I had a cousin who was extremely good at engineering and especially doing things like that. And seemingly as a child, 10, 11 or something, he pulled this watch apart and put it all together again. Well, I wasn't going to be outdone with that. I found myself in the kitchen and I took the clock off the cooker and very cleverly took it apart.

But for the life of me, I couldn't get it quite back together again. However, I didn't really understand why my mother was so angry, because it had lost its alarm. Anyway, that's the way it was.

So what I'm going to start with is the *Saḷāyatana Vibhaṅga*, or the exposition of the sixfold base. Now, Bhikkhu Bodhi has translated this as the sixfold base. *Āyatana* is a sphere. It's a dimension. And so one of the qualities of our six senses is that they don't mix into each other. You can't for the life of you smell through your ears and you can't see through your nose. And they are separate experiences of life. So we have vision, we have hearing—these are two very different qualities, very different capabilities, and they don't mix.

Now remember that in Buddhist psychology, consciousnesses are arising at a rapid rate depending on where the attention moves or what's calling the attention. So even now as I'm looking at this little gadget and hopefully you can see me looking at you rather than away from you, I'm also hearing what I'm saying and thinking what I'm saying. All this comes together as one person looking, seeing, thinking. But in Buddhist psychology, the millions—thousands—of little consciousnesses that run so rapidly together give us the impression of continuity. And that, of course, gives us also an impression of solidity. So what is continuous has the feel of always being here in a total congealed way. And that's basically our delusion.

So just before we go into it, remember that when you read the discourses, there's only two things that the Buddha really is interested in, and that's ethics and transcendence. The transcendence he points to—I think he has 250 ways of pointing to *Nibbāna*. None of them actually hit the nail on the head, because the definition is beyond the psychophysical world, and therefore is indescribable. And somehow we make a mistake.

So once we understand that this nirvanic element is actually this very awareness, this Buddha, the one who knows within us, then we understand that something's gone wrong with its relationship to this psychophysical organism. Now, at what point does it actually associate with or identify with this organism? It's at the point of consciousness. And at that point of consciousness, what we discover as meditators, when we come back out of the involvement with the senses, with the emotions, with the thought, is that we discover ourselves, and it is a discovery of being the observer—the unattached observer, the equanimous observer, the equanimous feeler, the one who knows, the one who's experiencing. And yet that sense of self that comes with it is a mirror image on that very same consciousness. And so there's your first relationship. And it's through that relationship that you enter into the world of the mind.

So he's very keen on getting us to, first of all, understand from a backwards point of view, starting at the base, how we build up the world. And this is what this sixfold base discourse is trying to do.

So I shall read the passage. "Thus have I heard. On one occasion, the Blessed One was living at Sāvattī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park." So we've come across this monastery before. It was definitely, I think, his favorite.

"And there he addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Bhikkhus!' 'Venerable Sir,' they replied. And the Blessed One said, 'Bhikkhus, I shall teach you an exposition of the sixfold base. Listen and attend closely to what I shall say.' 'Yes, Venerable Sir,' the bhikkhus replied, and the Blessed One said this:

"The six internal bases should be understood. The six external bases should be understood. The six classes of consciousness should be understood. The six classes of contact should be understood. The eighteen kinds of mental exploration should be understood. The thirty-six positions of beings should be understood. Therein, by depending on this, abandon that. There are three foundations of mindfulness that the noble one cultivates, cultivating which the noble one is a teacher fit to instruct a group. Among teachers of persons for training, he is called the incomparable leader of persons to be tamed. This is the summary of the exposition of the sixfold base."

Now, I think anybody reading that paragraph for the first time would probably suffer from a severe headache. There's so much presumption of knowledge in it that it really is a bit of a pain. So anyway, he now actually gives us an explanation.

"'The six internal bases should be understood.' So it was said, and with reference to what was this said? There are the eye base, the ear base, the nose base, the tongue base, the body base, and the mind base. So it was with reference to this that it is said the six internal bases should be understood."

In other words, the six senses. Now, we're quite aware of the senses—of the retina, for the eye, etc. Now, it's not as though the retina is—of course, the retina is the energy you can call it whatever it is, and it is that which leaves the body upon death. Now you don't have to believe that to understand this, but you have to understand that the mind is of a more subtle form than the material body.

At that point, the retina is, shall we say, the sensitive part. That's the internal sense base. But that's not what we actually know. What we actually experience is vision. It's the capability of seeing. So that's what he's talking about there. He's talking about the point where the mind touches the body and perceives form, light—well, we'll come to that in a minute. So it's the same with the ear—the sensitive part, whatever it's called, the drum or something. All that is actually sensitive to are the incoming waves of pressure from the air around. That's all. We're going to go into that a bit more deeply in a bit.

So here he is saying there are six of these internal bases. Now when it comes to the mind, there's nothing in the scriptures which tells you what the actual physical base of the mind is. And I was happy to read that even in the Abhidhamma, the later teaching, there was no base for the mind actually explained. But the commentaries felt that there was something missing here, so they came to the conclusion that there was a globule of blood in the heart—the *hadaya-vatthu*, the base of the heart—where the mind actually had its contact with the whole body.

Yes, it's been difficult to find this little globule of blood. And there was once an occasion when Sayadaw Pandita, who is in America—this is a story I heard—where they asked him, "Well, what happens in a

transplant?" So the heart's taken out and the blood is put through a machine. So where is this *hadaya-vatthu*? Where is this base of the mind? So he had to say, "Well, it's in the machine."

So going back to the scriptures, the Buddha doesn't say that it has a base as such. And I personally just presume that it's the whole body. But it doesn't have to be, because the information coming from the five senses is enough for the mind to work out what's actually happening around it, what's actually coming into the mind from the outside.

So the next one is: "'The six external bases should be understood.' So it was said. With reference to what was this said? There are form base, sound base, odour base, flavour base, tangible base, mind-object base. So it was with reference to this that it was said the six external bases should be understood."

So for the eye to see something, there has to be something to be seen. And what is said to be seen on the actual eye base is just colour, which creates a certain sense of form. But everything else is actually done by the mind.

So at the ear, for instance, what is actually felt at the ear drum is only pressure. There is no sound. And it's taken into the mind, through the mind door, and it's there that it's understood as a sound. And from a sound, a meaning is given to it. And from a meaning, there's a reaction.

So when you hear the bell of an alarm, the only thing that actually strikes the ear is the pressure waves. And then everything else comes in. So first of all, there's a sound, and then you know it's a bell, and you know it's an alarm bell, and then you know you've got to get up. So you come out always at the end of that process. That's experiential, by the way.

And then on the third one, he says: "'The six classes of consciousness should be understood.' And with reference to what was this said? There are eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness and mind consciousness. So it was with reference to this that it was said the six classes of consciousness should be understood."

So you have three components here for us to have an experience. The first, you have to have that sense base. You have to have some sort of object, and you have to have consciousness. So you can see if the sound waves come in—so there's your object, the bell. The ear is what actually brings it into the mind, and it must manifest somewhere. The mind is doing all the work in terms of giving you the reason etc., and it manifests somewhere.

So this consciousness is just a screen upon which things happen, upon which things are known. And the delusion is to give that screen of consciousness the intelligence which actually belongs to the awareness, the intuitive awareness, the Buddha. Got it?

And this is, for those of you who know dependent origination, this is the moment of contact. So you've got the body and mind. There's your first split. There's your first separation. And then dependent on the body

and mind, you've got these six sense bases. And depending on the six sense bases, you have contact. And at contact, you have to have the sense base, the object, and that screen of consciousness for it to manifest on.

So that hopefully clears up the first bit of that awful paragraph: the six external bases should be understood, the six internal bases should be understood, the six external bases should be understood, and the six classes of consciousness should be understood, and the six classes of contact should be understood.

"'The six classes of contact should be understood.' So it is said. With reference to what is this said? There is eye contact, ear contact, nose contact, tongue contact, body contact and mind contact. So it is with reference to this that it was said the six classes of contact should be understood."

So that's got us through the first section. Let's see what the time is. Yes, I might just do the next bit before we go on.

So then we talk about the eighteen kinds of mental exploration. "'The eighteen kinds of mental exploration should be understood.' So it was said, and with reference to what was this said? On seeing a form with the eye, one explores a form productive of joy, one explores a form productive of grief, one explores a form productive of equanimity. On hearing a sound, on smelling an odour with the nose, on tasting a flavour with the tongue, on touching a tangible with the body, on cognizing a mind object with the mind—"

Remember, your mind objects are not only this stuff coming in, but your emotions and your thought life, your imaginative life. All that must appear upon the mind base, the mind consciousness.

"One explores the mind object productive of joy, one explores the mind object productive of grief, and one explores the mind object productive of equanimity. Thus there are six kinds of exploration with joy, six kinds of exploration with grief, and six kinds of exploration with equanimity. So it was with reference to this that it was said the eighteen kinds of mental exploration should be understood."

So we've slightly moved off the sense base here to an internal reaction. And that reaction is learnt by us. So even as little babies, we know what is painful and what is not painful. What makes us happy and what doesn't? We're very quick to cry when we get upset, when we're not getting enough milk, and we're very quick to smile, at least after a couple of weeks or something, when we feel happy. And other times, we're very peaceful. That's if you're a good baby.

So here there's a point where we have this reaction. And although we use the words joy and grief, of course, it refers back to pleasant and unpleasant. And this takes us to the next step in the dependent origination, which is *vedanā*.

So *vedanā* is an understanding of what we're experiencing as either pleasant or unpleasant. I said reaction—that's not quite the right word. It's an interpretation of what we're experiencing from an affective point of view. In other words, how we feel about it.

So this is about recognizing that whenever we hear something, see something, eat something etc., it's

always going to produce a mental state—a mental state which is either in some level of joy even if it's only a little, some level of grief even if it's only a little, and sometimes just an equanimous level which is normally experienced when we have something neutral, when there's just a neutral feeling.

So for instance, even now your tongue—because there's no specific taste on it, it's not producing any particular emotional reaction. We don't have a feel about it. It doesn't feel either unpleasant or pleasant. So that's what the meaning is here.

So I think that's enough for one night, what do you think? So I think we shall come back to this exposition, and hopefully by the end of it we'll know something about the six sense bases in the way that the Buddha wanted us to understand them.

So we can now cool ourselves with a bit of meditation.

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